

**The Kingdom of Heaven is Like…**

**September 24, 2017**

**Matthew 20:1-16**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Owner of the Vineyard, Our Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like… I’ve speculated a time or two about what heaven is like. I usually picture floating on a cloud with harps and violins playing or sitting at a really long table piled high with all my favorite food and all my family and friends sitting by my side and across from me and we’re all having a great time. There’s no arguing or grumbling. There’s no jealousy or envy over who has more food or a better seat at the table.

I’ve never imagined the Kingdom of Heaven as being called to work out in the sun in a vineyard. When I was a child, probably about 8 or 10 years old, my mother worked in a vineyard in northern Ohio. I remember she got paid by how many grapes she picked in a day. It was really hard work and she would come home at night hands and feet aching and her hands would be cut up and stained by the red grapes. It’s hard for me to rethink my view of Heaven from a place of eternal rest or an eternal party to a place of such hard work. I think the discrepancy between my vision of Heaven and Jesus description of the Kingdom of Heaven is due to the fact that we’re talking about two different Heavens. My vision is the Heaven of life after death, the great by and by. That place where only the good people who accepted Christ as the Lord and confessed their faith during their lifetime go when they die. That’s not what Jesus is talking about when He says the Kingdom of Heaven is like… Jesus is talking about the Kingdom that has come to earth and is at hand right here and right now.

I’ve explained this once or twice before, but we too soon forget. In the original language of the Bible the word for kingdom doesn’t refer to an actual literal place like the kingdom of Great Briton. Instead the Greek word for kingdom literally means any and every place where the king rules. So, the Kingdom of Heaven is anywhere and everywhere that God rules in the hearts and minds of people. With this in mind, Jesus’ parable of these workers in God’s vineyard isn’t about that place where people go when they die, it’s about how we’re treated and the values we live under once you call yourself a Christian right here on good ol’ planet earth. In this life, those of us who follow Jesus as the Lord are currently living in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus wants us to know what to expect when we live in this Kingdom of Heaven. That’s why he told so many parables about life in the God’s Kingdom. This parable today is one of the most important. Over the years it’s been turned into an allegory where each character in the story is assigned to a person or group of people in the real world. For a long time, the early workers were thought to be the original chosen people of God, the Hebrews or Jews. They were called first to be workers in God’s Vineyard, while the Gentiles were the Johnny-come-latelies who were called at the last hour. Since Matthew’s congregation was known to be made up of both Jewish believers and Gentile converts, this message from Matthew to his congregation was simply an admonishment to the Jews in the congregation to stop thinking of themselves as superior to the Gentile converts since all will receive the same reward. That’s an interesting understanding of the story, but if that’s all there is to it, then how is it of any value for us today. We’re all Gentile converts. We aren’t dealing with a mixed congregation of Jews and Gentiles where the Gentiles are being treated as second class.

Others have identified the early called workers as those who’ve been Christian their whole lives. These are the folks who have always served, both within the Church and also served their neighbors near and far. Under this interpretation the later called workers are those who came to know Jesus much later in life. They might have even confessed Jesus as Lord only on their death bed. In this case the meaning would be that it makes no difference whether you have been baptized as an infant or on your death bed, salvation belongs to all just the same. Once again, unless you’re jealous of those who recently come to know Jesus as the Lord, then this story isn’t relevant to us today.

I said this is one of the most important parables Jesus told, but if we understand it from either of these perspectives we’re left with nothing useful for our lives. This story is relevant to every one of us and here’s why. It isn’t so much about being envious or jealous of other Christians as it’s about the difference between those who are called to work for their reward and those who live under God’s reign by the shear Grace of God and we all struggle with that. I see it sort of like this:

A sinner was found lying in a deep pit. He was completely unable to save himself from the mire; he could not free himself from the mire of the pit even to raise his hands to be grabbed by a friend at the top of the pit. Now it happened that a very well-meaning neighbor came along. He peered over the edge of the pit and said: “Poor fellow, I feel extremely sorry for you. Why were you such a fool as to fall into that pit in the first place? Let me give you a bit of advice: If you get out, don’t get into it again.” Later, a priest came along and saw the man in the pit. He said to the sinner in the pit: “Poor fellow, I am very much pained to see you in there. I think if you could get half way out of this mire, I would be able to lift you out the rest of the way. But the man was helpless. And so, he continued to lie there. Later, when Jesus came that way, he saw the man. Jesus didn’t say a word, but lowered a cross down into the pit, climbed down, hung onto the cross beams and reached out and grabbed the man, lifting him up onto his back and carrying him and the cross out of the pit. He placed the man on edge of the pit, bandaged his wounds, and invited him to follow him during the rest of his pilgrimage on earth. For the first time during this whole rescue, the man said something, he said, “Yes, Jesus, I will follow.”

God is gracious with His love and those of us in the Kingdom rejoice with great joy that He gives so generously. There is no anger, envy, or jealousy only joy that another worker has joined us in the vineyard. Today Helena and Brooklyn join us in the vineyard as they are both added to the roles of God’s workers through the gift of Baptism. They come to the sacrament not trusting God will be fair and just, but that God will give them what they do not deserve. Like us, they’re trusting God will provide for them despite the fact that on their own they can’t even lift a finger to get themselves out of the pit of sin. Today, for Helena and Brooklyn, Jesus crawled down into the muck and mire of their sin and pulled them out, not with the power of his strength or great armies of soldiers, but armed only with the power of His love.

Yet, for many of us we’re still bothered by how unfair it seems that the early workers received the same as the late workers. We still want to be rewarded based on how hard we work. My take on this is that apparently, in the Kingdom of Heaven we’re all salaried workers and not paid by the hour. We don’t like this system because we’re not in control, God is. If we work for our reward, we control the outcome, but because we’re not in control, God determines the outcome and that makes us crazy. We say, “How can that lazy bum or that murderer or that child molester receive the same love of God and forgiveness that I, who labor all my life to be a good person receive?”

God set up a system not dependent on us having to come to Him. He comes to us. Just as in this parable the Lord invites us into His kingdom. He comes out and recruits us. Some of us were recruited early; about the third hour. We were baptized as infants and became one of God’s children. For others, like Helena and Brooklyn it took God coming to us a little later in life. And for others it will take God until the eleventh hour to bring them into the kingdom. But, never the less, we will be there. God made us a promise and God never gives up on us. He has called us by his grace to be His own. Whether we are "the first or the last" we all receive the same reward: forgiveness of all 100 percent of our sin and eternal life. So, is this fair? No, my friends, it’s not fair, it’s called Grace.

Thanks be to God for calling each of us to labor in His Vineyard. When Jesus comes again, may we all be found like my sainted mother, with aching hands and feet, with cuts and stains on our hands all from harvesting the grapes of God’s Vineyard. May we be the ones who rejoice when a lost sheep is found or when a worker is added, even at the last hour. May we never forget the reward we receive is from God’s generous, life-giving Grace, and not based on what we’re done to earn it. Amen.